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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses contextualization in the TESL classroom. Starting from the statement that fluency and comprehension are more important than absolute accuracy, and that to know how to use language students must "experience context in situations," a definition is attempted of the terms "context," "situation," and "experience." Situation is defined as substantial reality, language being formal reality; context is defined as the relationship between language and situation; and shared experience is necessary for meaningful context. Practical suggestions include having the students describe the English language (using language to contextualize); focusing on the ethnology of the English speaker (using culture); and giving lessons in a field not normally taught in the English classroom, such as mathematics (using general knowledge). In this way the language is experienced as it truly is, a part, not all, of communication; and some of the burden is taken from language and shifted to extra-linguistic activity. Two textbooks are recommended for help on contextualizing language lessons. (AM)

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Context, Situation and Experience

We are all agreed that contextualization is a well-established principle in language teaching, and that our problem is how to go about contextualizing language lessons (Slager, 1973). Contextualizing is apparently not a simple thing to achieve; we would all agree that it is very difficult to teach a pattern so that it has meaning, and the difficulty seems to increase arithmetically when we try to honor the principle of grading the structures from easy to hard while providing contexts. The problem of accommodating the grading of structures seems to me so difficult that it cannot be solved; insisting on teaching structures as the first order of business appears to be a reification of knowledge that makes language a thing that remains a foreign object to the students. Of course, language lessons must be graded in difficulty, but I feel that the controlling factors must be not only the structure of the language, and the structure as it differs from the

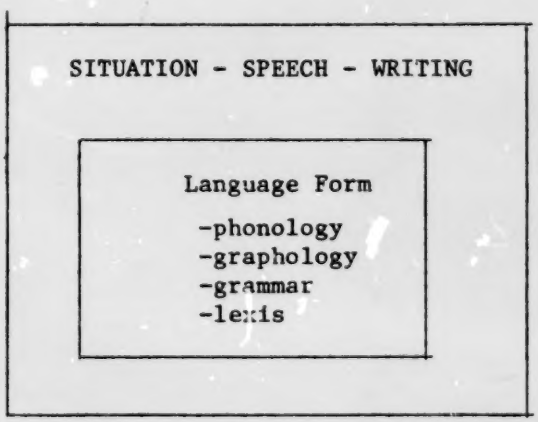
structure of the students' native language, but also the appropriateness of the structures to the students' understanding of experience in general and experience as it is culturally understood by speakers of the language they are learning. If this seems to you a far cry from the use of the language laboratory to practice conversion drills, you are right. I personally feel that such drills are necessary at some stages, but they quickly become deadening and they are often artificial and psychologically unjustified. I would argue that fluency and comprehension are much more important than correctness at every stage of language acquisition. I have met so many fluent, effective, and sloppy English speakers -- taxi drivers, waiters, business men, and others who never studied English -- whom I can compare to carefully tutored university students and professionals who can't even call a dog in English. True linguistic cripples they are! Obviously it works better to learn to speak a language in a real-life situation than to have it taught to you by an animate or inanimate machine.

Furthermore, I don't assume that motivation and fun are synonymous. A lot of good lessons are hard and misery producing. If the students can't run away, they have to stay and fight, and often they learn well in such circumstances. I once inadvertently left a bag containing several hundred dollars on a train in Barcelona; suddenly I could speak fluent, but highly

inaccurate, Spanish. I got the bag back.

I will maintain in this essay that students must experience context in situations in order to learn how to read, write, speak, and understand. So the first step we teachers must take is to think deeply and clearly about what these terms mean. First of all, definitions of context, situation, and experience.

I want to get at an understanding of the terms context, situation, and experience by relying on the precise definitions of linguistics. To begin with, speech and writing, the two mediums or manifestations of language, are real and substantial. Similarly, situation is real and substantial. That is, within a situation we often find either speech or writing (or both) as part of the real world. But language itself is not substantially of this world. It is, rather, a real and formal thing, the organization, or structure, or patterns that relate the sounds of speech or the marks called writing to the situation, to the objects, things, events, relationships, and analogies of the real world, both physical and imaginative (Catford, 1965).

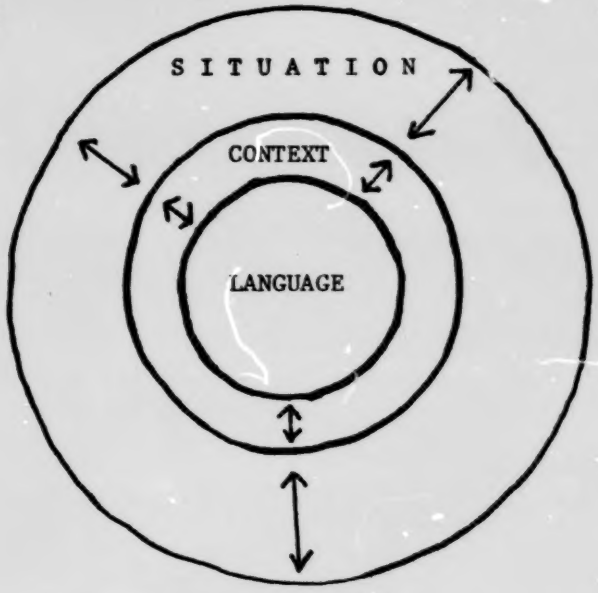


The situation (activities including speech and writing) is the substantial part of reality.

The language is a formal part of reality.

Context is the relationship between situation and language.

Another way to show the relationship between situation and language that suggests that language, context, and situation may be coextensive, is the following:



Context, in this sense, is the relationship between the formal levels of grammar and lexis (vocabulary), on the one hand, and situation, on the other. This is a way of saying that the relationship between, say, sounds and situation is that o:

contextual meaning, or as it is commonly known, of context. As such, context is coextensive with grammar and lexis. It is the meaning that language carries.

Situations are always culture bound, and students do not understand situations whenever they are different from those obtaining in their native cultures, unless they have experienced and understood the situations before. Yet they do understand most situations to some extent depending on the universality of the situations and the experiences that the student has had and the cleverness of the individual student in perceiving the meaning of a given situation.

The main problem that language teachers face is that the situation we're trying to set up in the classroom is usually coextensive with context. That is, given the sea of smiling faces, whatever we do is ordinarily a use of language. We begin and end with language. We create the whole lesson, the whole situation, out of language. We speak and read and write, and so the situation is little more than a context. Consequently there exists little that is extralinguistic in the situation to reinforce the meaning, and so we have to depend on language itself in the form of written texts and exercises and speech activities to provide the situation. Now if meaning is the relationship between language and situation, and in the classroom language and situation are coextensive, then we are relying entirely upon the students' previous experience and memory to provide meaning for what we are doing. This works fine

as long as the situation is something the students already understand. I remember a French lesson in high school about a visit to the circus. In that lesson I learned nothing about circuses, but I did learn how to translate "to be in the circus", and "to be at the circus" into French. The lesson worked well because the situation is the same in both French and English and my experience with circuses supported the context to such an extent that it was immediately clear.

To recapitulate the discussion so far:

A situation in which language is used is a language situation. A language situation is a language experience. A langauge experience should be a context, for context is the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning. Now since only meaning can throw light on meaning, context is meaning in a technical sense. But it is as such the relationship between situation and language. Our students mis-understand the situations and the language to some extent.

The way we make meaningful contexts is to share experience. The attempt to share experience is the goal of social phenomenology, that is, the job of relating one's experience of others' behavior to others' experience of one's behavior (Laing). As C.C. Fries put it in his Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language (1948): "We must try to enter into the whole range of experiences that the native speakers of the language have grown up with - the experiences that give content and meaning to

their worlds".

But how can we contextualize language lessons, make them meaningful? The answer is that we teachers must be artists who produce vivid imaginative realizations of situations. We must get at the truth of every situation and make the experience absolutely clear.

Every situation is culture bound. For example, a bullfight does not mean the same thing to a Spaniard as it does to a little old lady in Westmount. Similarly, the difference between love and like doesn't go very easily into French. We all know that the study of language must be accompanied by a study of culture, for the culture is the ground of being on which speakers and writers operate when they use language. Notice that I have said "when they use language." I did not say when they communicate. Communication is several things, but one thing it most certainly is not, is language. Language remains a formal abstraction with which we transmit messages and feelings and attitudes. It is the formal order of a part of communication, not communication itself. Furthermore, there are uses of language that are not communication at all, and I suspect that these uses of language are much more important in language learning than communication is.

Let me repeat: of the various langauge experiences, communication is only one, perhaps a socially important one, but it remains a kind of behavior, of acting, that is only a part of any situation, not the whole situation.

When one watches a football game, for example, he may experience cultural communication through the haptic, kinesic, and proxemic actions of the players. The situation may have very little language in it, yet it is a unit of culture with a beginning, a middle and an end. The drama and choreography of the football game may be extremely satisfying to one who knows what to watch for. It is an extralinguistic culturally-determined situation. At the opposite end of the scale there exists the kind of language activity that occurred in my mind when I wrote this paper. My physical situation had little to do with the use of language. I sat in my study and thought. I read and drank tea and smoked, activities that were irrelevant to what I was doing in my mind. And the writing of this paper was no less an experience than is a football game, and it was almost entirely linguistic. In fact, it was a language-learning experience that took place in a situation. It was a preparation for communication.

So we see that communication is only one of the other modalities of experience, other modalities of experience that may be more important in language learning than communication itself.

You may ask what are the other modalities of experience. An answer may be that we seem to live in two worlds, the inner world and the outer world. We might say that our inner world is our personal idiom of experience, and the outer world, the only one most people seem to be aware of, is the world of social interaction and communication. But this division does not seem

accurate or profitable to me. Inner and outer are both personal idioms of experience. Our experience of our bodies, of other people, of the animate and inanimate world, is no more real to us than the other modes of experience - perception, imagination, phantasy, reverie, dreams, memory, rehearsal, talking to oneself, or the act of composition before we write it down. Experience is an invisible, formal way of knowing, of which language is a part. Experience is abstract and culturally determined just as language is. It is, at the same moment, inner and outer, process and praxis, input and output, subjective and objective, psychic and somatic, introspective and extrospective (Laing). Experience is more important than communication; all communication depends on it.

Let me ask you to think about how a musician prepares to perform. He practices with his body, of course, but that practice <u>is</u> performance. But where does his competence lie, where is it formed, how is it formed? The preparation for performance occurs in his mind as he rehearses to himself - a daydream based on memory and imagination.

I feel certain that language is learned and perfected in the same manner, both the native and second languages. We wonder how a child is able to generalize language from the limited sample he is exposed to. But our assumption is that the sample he has experienced in his environment is the only experience he has with language. I would say that a normal child has an almost continual

experience of language. He talks to himself with his inner voice. He imagines situations. He phantasizes. He daydreams. Often he babbles in an annoying manner. He creates language experiences for himself most of the time, while awake and even while asleep. We might say that the principal use of language is for self-expression.

Is it not partly in this sort of imaginative personal language experience that a second language is learned too? How is this interior monologue different from silent reading? Do we not have to turn over in our minds what we say and write? Were not the Old Ones right when they had us memorize Gray's Elegy, and Thanatopsis and La Fontaine's Fables? Then we knew something that our minds could operate upon. There is something to be said for memorization, for translation, and for explication of text, for rapid reading, for dictation, for summary sriting, etc., as controlled meaningful experiences. They cause us to use the written medium of language in creating language competence.

On the other hand, speech activities can provide contexts if the activities are not culturally obscure. C. C. Fries noted in 1948 that "the goal of language as a communicative art is akin to that of all artistic effort -- vivid imaginative realization." But we cannot achieve "vivid imaginative realization" if our students do not experience our culture as we native or bicultural speakers do. Fries warned us against taking for granted our students' understanding of our formal expectations as regards ethnology. That

is, do our students understand English speakers' concepts of play, games, discipline, freedom, privacy, modesty, courtship, social distinctions, religion, hygiene, food, tabus, and so on? If not, we must make sure that the background experience we help them achieve in our lessons is thoroughly annotated and explained. Another way to say this is that we must create contexts. And there are no contexts without situations and experiences.

Some practical ways of creating contexts involve getting students to do things with language. And there need not be an artificial division between the mediums of writing and speech in any learning situation.

One of the most productive devices I've found for high-intermediate second language students is to use language laboratory practice exercises to induce grammar generalizations. These students were all going to be English teachers, so they were interested in the description of the language to begin with. Instead of making inductive generalizations in the grammar class, the students first did the substitution and conversion drills in the language laboratory, and then we discussed and practiced each difficult grammatical structure together in class. This approach saved time and energy for we found we could neglect whatever the students already controlled and get to the heart of each problem efficiently. Here the situation was quite special; it is one of the few occasions on which the focus of the lesson should be on the form of the language itself. Remember that students seldom

profit from knowledge about language.

Ordinarily the focus of each lesson should be on the ethnology of English speakers -- their culture in the broadest sense, how they see themselves and the world in general, how their politics, religions, social life, economic systems, sports, arts, and intellectual endeavors all operate. Only the lesson should be concerned with general knowledge.

The form of the contextualization can range from simple story-telling to language tasks, such as project reports, information searches, scavenger hunts, and games with maps and charts or word-games like twenty questions. In every case, a passive activity such as hearing or watching a film, lecture, story, slide-show, essay, description or explanation should lead to active language use through reading, note-taking, oral and written reports, recitation, discussion, extemporaneous speaking, debates, singing, rôle-playing, dialogues (memorized and/or invented), and acting out funny or dramatic skits, so that both oracy and literacy can be attained.

I'll never forget one of my highschool classmates explaining the operation of the Guillotine with the help of a model he had constructed and notes crudely translated from the encyclopedia. In fact, I'll never forget my highschool French teacher, David Jackson, of Lincoln Highschool, Vincennes, Indiana, because he taught me French, and he taught me about France and the French people.

I have talked about using culture and language to contextualize lessons. There remains another major focus for language lessons that one might call general knowledge. We know that when students study arithmetic in English, for example, they learn both arithmetic and English, even though there is no focus on the language as such. So we could contextualize language lessons by teaching poultry farming or the annals of Victorian literature.

One of the most useful recent textbooks to appear is Joan Morley's Improving Aural Comprehension, a text that uses dictation and a workbook format to teach students to hear, write and read English through focus on several general areas of knowledge such as numerical relationships, the relation between sound and spelling, directions and spatial relationships, time and temporal sequence, dates and chronological order, measurement of amounts, proportion, comparison, and contrast. I recommend this text highly because it works. It works with elementary-level students, and also with advanced students, filling in the gaps in their knowledge of English by providing complete contexts that the students have already experienced in another language. For comparison, how many of us can actually handle compass directions in our native language without confusion? Morley's text is so useful that it might be used on the junior-highschool level with native English speakers. They would learn how to use a lot of English. Thus a focus on objective knowledge is a third source of contextualization

for language lessons.

In this paper I have attempted to define context, experience and situation, and I have suggested ways of using language, culture, and knowledge as means of contextualizing language lessons. I would recommend another book in closing. It is Ronald Laing's The Politics of Experience, a book that might help us all understand our students better and help us become better artists of experience so that we can create concrete contexts in fullness and wholeness.

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